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THE SUBJECT OF RELIGION
LACAN AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

KENNETH REINHARD AND JULIA REINHARD LUPTON

Despite Freud's Nietzschean unmasking of religion as ideology, psychoanalysis has frequently been attacked as itself a religion, a cabal of analyst-priests dedicated to the worship of a dead master. Such critics "do not believe in Freud" in much the same way as atheists "do not believe in God," and their rejections of psychoanalysis in the name of the secular partake in the very structure of religious thought they claim to repudiate. In *Seminar XXI: Les non-dupes errent,* Lacan comments on the blindness of the atheistic insight concerning religion: "I know that you're not believers, right? But that doesn't mean that you aren't all the more conned . . . because even if you are not believers, you still believe in that aspiration [for the love of God]. I won't say that you suppose it; rather, *it supposes you*" [Dec. 18, 1973; our trans.]. In Lacan's analysis, it is not that secular intellectuals suffer from unexamined religious "suppositions" or assumptions, to be swept away through a little ideology-critique or time on the couch. The case is rather, in Lacan's strong formulation, that religious discourse *supposes us*—supports and underwrites our very structures of being, subjectivity, and social interaction. That is, the secular subject is *produced by* the religious discourses that precede and continue to speak through it; the challenge for the contemporary critic is not to silence or debunk those discourses, but rather to bring the modern subject to assume responsibility for their enunciation.

Throughout the decades of his seminar, Lacan addressed the monotheistic foundations of Western subjectivity as a set of discursive ruptures or cuts which continue to scar and brand the modern subject beyond their secular abrogation. Distinguishing between Freud "the individual with his atheistic profession of faith" and "the Freud who was the first to acknowledge the value and relevance of [the] myth . . . we call the death of God" [*S VII* 192–93], Lacan insists that Freud regarded monotheism as an epochal divide that irrevocably altered all that came before and after it: "On the left of this [monotheistic] message, there are some things that are henceforth outdated, obsolete; they no longer hold beyond the manifestation of the message. On the right, things are quite different" [172]. What, in Lacan's analysis, is the difference that monotheism has made, both during its periods of dominance and after? The laws, narratives, and symbols of monotheism continue to undergird key fantasies of personhood, nationhood, and neighborhood in the modernity that purports to have supplanted them. In Lacan's formulation, monotheism "supposes" the subject of these fantasies, precipitating it from out of the expanse of signifiers and in relation to a sublime object of both unbearable enjoyment and social obligation. Moreover, it is the scandal and the gift of monotheism that it not only creates moments of traumatic singularity, but also *thinks the singular as trauma,* rending the fabric of an animistic nature which would unite every polarity of being in the fullness of a sexual relation. Unlike the gods of Greek philosophy, the monotheistic God is not part of the nature he creates. In its decisive thinking of singularity, monotheism elicits and eludes all rapprochement with philosophical conceptions of the One, whether in the guise of Hellenized Judaism, Pauline theology, or Arab Aristotelianism. Lacan extends the monotheistic project of thinking singularity

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by insisting that "there is something of One" [*il y a de l'Un*]—not the self-identical One of Greek logic, mathematics, and cosmology, but the One of a violent rupture that creates subjects and their worlds around a void, an *un* that un-does the primacy it speaks.

If, from the Lacanian vantage, the singular invention of the God shared by the People of the Book forever separates religion from philosophy, we would also insist that religion is not simply a subset of "culture," understood as the symbolic practices that unify a people and a period. Since its beginnings, psychoanalysis has been put to the work of cultural studies and anthropological speculation, with often embarrassing results. Such a vassalage runs counter to the Lacanian project, which refuses to reduce religion as a structure to the social formations in which it arises. Whereas culture is constituted as the mythically sanctioned circulation of goods, religion articulates those scandals that mobilize and arrest the economy of social and sexual exchange: religions thus exist at the limits of the cultures that enframe them [*S VII* E 75–76]. Although religion is often placed in the service of monitoring the flow of the social, the social can itself be understood as a defense against the excessive expenditures—the potlatches, sacrifices, and self-mutilations—demanded by religion [*S VII* E 234–35]. It is precisely religion's difference from both philosophy and culture, we argue, that gives it its specific gravity in Lacan's thought and enlists it in the task of formulating a psychoanalytic criticism beyond both the facile conjunction and the polemical opposition of theory and history.

In the space carved out by religion between philosophy and culture, Lacan encountered the Decalogue as a foundational text in the creation of the modern subject. Whereas much of the Bible and its reception consists of myth and credo, story and dogma, the Decalogue is a table of laws that says nothing of belief, contains little rationale, and alludes to narrative only tangentially. As such, according to Lacan, it has a "privileged character in relation to the structure of the law" [E 81; trans. mod.], and sets forth the place of the subject in the nexus of prohibition and desire in speech. The Decalogue itself, in Lacan's reading of it in *Seminar VII,* presents a template of the subject's primary alienation by a master signifier, the institution of the rule of speech at the expense of the idolatrous pleasures of the imaginary, and the traumatic production of libidinal objects that overcharge the social relation with the insufferable pressure of the drives. In this essay we reconstruct the subject of religion by reading Lacan's commentary on the Decalogue through hermeneutical openings provided by the exegetical history of the Ten Commandments. By locating the subject of religion in the negative intersection between culture and philosophy, we hope to indicate directions for a Lacanian criticism beyond the twin lures of social realism and theoretical idealism.

1

There Is Only One Signifier: S_1

Lacan addresses the Ten Commandments as part of his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis, a seminar most influential in American circles for its explication of *das Ding* as the real kernel of symbolic and imaginary formations. For Lacan, the ethical originality of psychoanalysis lies in its recognition that the moral law not only limits the originary *jouissance* embodied in *das Ding,* but also preserves and indeed heightens that violence in the law's exorbitant demands on the subject. In Lacan's formulation, "*Das Ding* presents itself at the level of unconscious experience as that which already makes the law." *Das Ding* materializes the "capricious and arbitrary" voice of the law

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as a pure command coming from the Other, a performative utterance and executive decision that bears down on the subject prior to any semantic content or regulatory function [*S VII* E 73/F 89]. In his reading of Kant just preceding the discussion of the Decalogue, Lacan insists that ethics in its Kantian reformulation has nothing to do with a common morality; indeed, the categorical imperative is so far from representing communal standards of the good that the obscene *jouissance* of Sade forms its internal limit. For both Kant and Sade, pain, not pleasure, conditions the ethical: "the outer extremity of pleasure is unbearable to us" because it forces "an access to the Thing." Law as embodied in speech both protects us from that pain by inducting the subject into the circuits of representation, and remains a permanent link to it by continually reopening the divide between meaning and utterance, symbolic structure and traumatic *jouissance*. Lacan concludes his comments on the two philosophers with a remark on fantasy: "fantasms cannot bear the revelation of speech" [E 80/F 97]. Not only does the *jouissance* encysted in fantasy evaporate on contact with language, but speech in its capacity as "revelation"—whether on the couch or at Mt. Sinai—is itself an unbearable approach to the Thing it articulates, a sublime encounter with the object of the law, with the law *as* object.

Immediately following his famous coupling of Kant with Sade, Lacan introduces the Decalogue not as a universal code of moral conduct—"Ten Good Ideas" for happy social interaction—but as the uncanny *Urtext* of a strange people in a strange land:

> *We are then brought back to the moral law insofar as it is incarnated in a certain number of commandments. I mean the ten commandments, whose assembly, at a period that is not lost in the past, is at the origin of a people that sets itself apart as a chosen people.* [*S VII* E 80/F 97–98; trans. mod.]

Lacan situates the Ten Commandments in their narrative context in Exodus and Deuteronomy, as the founding document of the Jews as a chosen people, both exceptional and excluded in the annals of the West. Later in the seminar Lacan asserts the persistence of the laws of the Decalogue in modernity: "whether or not we obey them, we still cannot help hearing them—in their indestructible character they prove to be the very laws of speech" [E 174/F 204–05]. Like the drives, the Ten Commandments have an "indestructible character," insofar as their imperatives continue to insist beyond their dialectical absorption into the institutions of belief and the secular workings of practical reason. Although Lacan and Freud are both atheists, in the common sense of the word, they "cannot help hearing" the commandments in the continued rule of the laws of speech, in their double relationship to *jouissance*.

Lacan's emphasis on the Decalogue as a primary instantiation of the "laws of speech" is in keeping with the texture and tenor of the document itself and the issues it has posed to the exegetical tradition. In Exodus, the scene of its first telling, the Decalogue is framed by a "preamble" that forms a textual limit rather than a decorative border, determining the internal condition and force of its signification:

> *God spoke all these words, saying, I the Lord [YHVH] am your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, the house of bondage: You shall have no other gods besides Me.* [Exodus 20: 1–3][1]

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1. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from the Pentateuch are from Sarna, ed., The JPS Torah and Commentary *(in English and Hebrew). Other biblical citations are from May and Metzger, eds.,* The Oxford Annotated Bible, Revised Standard Version.

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As the rabbis have noted, there is a striking redundancy in the text's insistence on God's speaking: "God spoke [*v'y'daber*] all these words [*kol ha-davarim*], saying [*limor*]." In order to explain the iteration, the traditional commentary goes in two directions at once: toward the radical singularity of God's expression on the one hand, and the equally sublime multiplicity of his speech on the other. The medieval French commentator Rashi argued that God spoke the entire set of commandments in a single incomprehensible and terrifying utterance [2: 102]; Maimonides adds that God's speech lacked distinct phonemes [Agnon 260]; another commentary reinforces this image of radical condensation by suggesting that God's voice had no echo [*Midrash Rabbah* 3: 336]. Yet Rashi goes on to write that after speaking the commandments all at once, God began to repeat them one by one; even this was more than the people could bear, and they begged Moses to shield them from God's terrible voice by speaking the commandments for him. God speaks twice, a doubling that institutes the folds of tradition. Thus God repeats his own utterance, Moses transmits that of God, and the stone tablets on which the commandments are inscribed undergo destruction and replacement.[2] Moreover, the Decalogue appears twice in the Torah: first in the book of Exodus, and then again in Deuteronomy—literally "the second law"—where Moses retells the story of Exodus to a new generation of Israelites born in the desert. In the primal scene of the enunciation and transmission of the Decalogue, the unbearable singularity of the law gives rise immediately to the repetitions that preserve it, a "deutero-nomos" that both transmits and deflects its force; in the words of Psalm 62, an authorizing topos for the exegetical tradition, "Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this."[3]

What God speaks is above all his name: "I myself [*anochi*] (am) YHVH."[4] Jewish tradition counts God's initial utterance as the first of the Ten Words or Deca-logue—in the Hebrew Bible the word "commandment" (*mitzvah*) does not appear in connection with this text.[5] Is this first line a commandment or a declaration? or rather, are the jussive and the constative inextricable in this inaugural utterance? Lacan's commentary on the Decalogue begins with the enunciation of God's name in order to derail from the start the long history of its assimilation to the Greek discourse of Being:

> *I must leave to one side the huge questions posed by the promulgation of these commandments by something that announces itself in the following form: "I am what I am" [*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*]. It is, in effect, necessary not to draw the text in the direction of Greek metaphysics by translating as "he who is," or "he who am." The English translation, "I am that I am," is, according to Hebrew scholars, the closest to what is meant by the formulation of the verse.* [E 81]

Lacan refers to the partial semanticization of the Tetragrammaton (YHVH), God's unspeakable yet intimate name, in the earlier scene of the Burning Bush. When Moses asks God whom he should say authorizes him to liberate the Israelites, God

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2. On the destruction of the tablets, see Robert Gibbs.

3. Another midrash imagines God's voice mutating into seven voices and seventy languages, a divine cacophony that at once addressed all the peoples of the world and was comprehensible to none [Bialik 81]. On Psalms 62:11 as a "call to exegesis," see Lévinas, Beyond the Verse *132.*

4. The sentence continues by identifying this God as He who brought the people out of Egypt. The name as "rigid designator" gives way to the name as descriptive tag, semanticizing the nonsensical signifier by bringing it into the signifying chain of historical process.

5. Ramban, following Rambam, writes, "This divine utterance constitutes a positive commandment" [2: 285].

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responds, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh," which vocalizes the elements of the divine name, Y and H, without fully rendering them into sense. Lacan insists on the fundamental nontranslatability between the Hebrew name of God and the Greek philosophy of Being; rather than a statement of predication or identity, of the form "A = X" or "A = A," the oral repetition of God's written name crystallizes its nonsensical character in the act of transmitting it, speaks it without saying it. It is this name which God speaks at the outset of the Decalogue; although some commentators rationalize it as the legislation of faith, and Christianity assimilates it into the prohibition of idolatry in the following verses, Judaism counts this line as the first of the Ten Words, in-stating within statement a legislative instance, a pure law without positive or negative content.

Hebrew does not use the present tense of the verb of being, and the line in question is no exception (*anochi YHVH Elohim*); hence the commandment cannot be taken strictly speaking as a declaration of existence, a definition of substance, or an exhortation of faith. The Ten Words, and especially this initial one, are at once creative, legislative, and descriptive, depositing within the apparently simple form of the statement a God otherwise than Being. The Name names this primary inadequation of the Hebrew God to Greek ontology even while appearing to invite such a correlation. Thus the question of "believing in God" is not at stake in the commandment, but rather the constitutive role of an unspeakable word in the formation of a people and the creation within it of the subject of religion. The function of the first word as a commandment rests in the "belief" in God's existence no more than the nature of language depends on belief in the efficacy of the signifier: in both cases, "there is something of One," a unicity that is structurally necessary even though, strictly speaking, without meaning. This something-of-One is cardinal, not ordinal, not the first number in the sequence of whole numbers, but an element exterior to the system it inaugurates.[6]

In the election of the Israelites as God's people, the proper name YHVH functions as the primary signifier Lacan will call "S_1," the signifier without signified that anchors the subject within a particular constellation of the symbolic order through a cataclysmic encounter with language in its materiality, as sheer command. The name is a "rigid designator" that indicates without describing, coming from outside and remaining foreign to the symbolic system in which it forever exiles the subject [see Žižek, *Sublime Object* 95–97; Fink 57]. This primary signifier is a nonsensical piece of language that calls the subject into virtual existence in the Other, without reference to the categories of being or knowing. This unary signifier plays a key role in what Lacan calls "alienation," the simultaneous creation and cancellation of the subject brought forth by the demands of the Other, from which it receives the orientation of its drives and the vector of its desires as fundamentally not-its-own. Rather than locating the subject in a secure position, alienation presents it with an impossible choice: between "being," the illusory totality offered by the bodily image, and "meaning," the infinite movement of signifiers. To choose the fullness of being is to give up on the possibility of meaning, of entry into the symbolic—a loss which itself diminishes being, by shutting off social intercourse; this is the choice of the psychotic. To choose meaning—the way of the neurotic—is to accept the substitution of the signifier for bodily *jouissance,* but thereby to lose that aspect of meaning that inheres in the body, including the body of the letter—*jouis-sens* [see Lacan, *S XI* 203–15; Fink 3–34].

Lacan repeatedly refers to the Tetragrammaton as a founding instance of the S_1, a primary signifier within Judaism and the civilizations of monotheism for which Judaism is the negated ground. During the period of the Temple, the speaking of

6. *On the "something of One"* (Y a d' l'Un)*, see Lacan,* Seminar XIX . . . Ou pire, *especially March 8, 15, and May 10, 1972; see also Jacques-Alain Miller,* 1, 2, 3, 4, *November 14, 1984.*

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this intimate name was prohibited on the pain of death and could be uttered only by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. In post-Temple Judaism, the Name is not spoken at all, indicated only by periphrasis as "Lord" (*Adonai*) or "The Name" (*haShem*). The Tetragrammaton points toward both meaning and being, yet is reducible to neither sphere: its letters suggest the verb of being, and thus promise a semantic content that would wed it to ontology, yet the conventions surrounding its articulation sustain the Name as a talismanic set of letters that cannot be translated into any definitive etymology or pragmatics. The third commandment, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God [*shem YHVH Elohechah*] in vain" [Ex. 20: 7; *Oxford Annotated Bible*], is designed precisely to sequester the Name in its status as primary signifier, to maintain the force of its primal repression: to keep it sacred, but also to *keep it away,* to prevent its annihilative power from bleeding into the language of the everyday. This Name is the gnomic signifier that mutely supports the discourse of the Other as its anchoring point, imposing its imperious commands on a subject defined by the rule of language and the prohibition of *jouissance*. This *jouissance,* however, does not disappear completely, but rather takes up residence in the *Ding*like gravity of the Name itself: the law not only cuts off enjoyment, but also preserves its pain.

2

Thou Shalt Have No Other Signifiers before Me: $S_1 \longrightarrow S_2$

If the First Commandment declares the singularity of God through the violent efficacy of his name, the Second Commandment establishes the cardinal place of this signifier in the orders of language and image that form around it:

> *You shall have no other gods besides me [*al pnei: *before my face]. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord [YHVH] your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.* [Ex. 20: 3–6]

The Second Commandment unfolds the traumatically symbolizing force of the First, weaving the singularity of God and his secret name into a larger universe of law and representation, a universe created by God yet fundamentally other than him. As Lacan notes, the basic movement of the Decalogue sets the imaginary realm of specular reflection and the symbolic order instituted by the signifier against each other by moving from the priority of God's name to the prohibition of idols:

> *That "I am what I am" is announced first of all to a small people in the form of that which saved it from the misfortunes of Egypt, and it begins by affirming, "You will adore no God but me, before my countenance." I leave open the question of what "before my countenance" means. Does it mean that beyond the countenance of God, i.e., outside Canaan, the adoration of other gods is not inconceivable for a faithful Jew? [. . .] It is nevertheless the case that the second commandment, the one that formally excludes not only every cult, but also every image, every representation of what is in heaven, on earth,*

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or in the void, seems to me to show that what is involved is in a very special relationship to human feeling as a whole. In a nutshell, the elimination of the function of the imaginary presents itself to my mind, and, I think, to yours, as the principle of the relation to the symbolic, in the meaning we give that term here; that is to say, to speech. Its principal condition is here. [E 81/F 98–99; trans. mod.]

In Lacan's analysis, symbolic alienation is the process by which the S_1 installs the subject in a sequence of signifiers in their plurality—S_2 or the signifying chain—through the sacrifice of the image. The linkage of S_1 to S_2 blocks off the imaginary, the infantile play of phantasms both eclipsed and brought into focus as such by the rule of this unpronounceable word and the ordered sequence it institutes. There are two multiplicities at stake here: on the one hand, the signifying chain, and on the other, the world of images. These two pluralities are overlaid in the *Gestalt* of meaning, in which word and thing, picture and idea, enter into a reified correspondence. The signifying chain takes its orientation from two opposed principles: the pure signifier that sets it into motion, and the image of full meaning toward which it yearns.

To prohibit idolatry, then, on its most archaic level is to rearticulate the primary cancellation of the image by the word; it thus models the infantile entrance into language. The commandment establishes the difference between *any* referent and its representation—hence its possible prohibition of all visualizations—by recourse to the limit case of God, the singular referent for which there can be no adequate symbol. In what Lacan calls "the laws of speech" incarnated by the Ten Commandments, the name of God is the exception that proves the rule, the signifier that transcends any meaning it might attract, and in the process inaugurates the signifying chain. Through its exclusion from that chain, the S_1 maintains the S_2 in their plurality, their lack of totality. The commandment against idolatry serves to call the signifying chain back to its anchoring in the unary signifier, not only in defense against the *primary imaginary* emblematized by autochthonous gods and polymorphous perversion, but also in reaction to the *secondary imaginary,* in which word and object coincide in the embrace of an absolute meaning that would resolve all contradictions.

In Exodus, the proscription against imitating "what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth" echoes the sequence and contents of God's creation of the world. It is a commonplace of the exegetical tradition to link the giving of the Law in Exodus and Deuteronomy to the creation of the world in Genesis; each occurs as "ten utterances," ten linguistic operations, through which God institutes a radically new order: in the first, the order of the cosmos, and in the second, the epoch of history. Key to the mapping of the prohibition against idolatry onto the template of the world's creation is the topos of humanity as fashioned in the image of God. Although Feuerbach delighted in reversing Genesis by declaring that man has made God in his own image, the wit is only apparent, since the dictum in Genesis is designed precisely to overturn the kind of pagan anthropomorphism that continues to animate Feuerbach's German ideology [27–32]. Whereas Feuerbach's revisionist reading of Genesis relies on the imaginary function of projection, which posits a fundamental continuity between man's self- understanding and the picture of God he creates, the insight of Genesis is to underscore the radical difference between man and God upon which their likeness is predicated.

The Book of Genesis builds the human universe on three orders of difference, the distinctions between man and nature, between man and God, and between male and female: "And God created man in his image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fertile and

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increase, fill the earth and master it'" [1: 27–28]. God completes the creation of man in his image by placing him over nature, as its master: the "likeness" of man to God depends on man's difference from the natural world. Moreover, what alienates man from nature is the subject's alienation *in language,* precisely what makes him God-like. If man and God appear to mirror each other in a projective fashion à la Feuerbach, this mirroring is expressed in the form of a chiasmus, a schematic relation created in and by language, produced through the syntactical inversions of words and not in the realm of visual likeness or ontology: "And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him." The Hebrew *tselem*—likeness, idol, semblance, originally meaning "something cut off," hence coordinate with carved or graven [Klein 548–49]—at once locates "man" and "God" in a potentially idolatrous continuum and defines man as "cut off" from both God and nature through the alienating function of language. Thus Rashi glosses "in Our image" as "in our type," emphasizing the linguistic and schematic nature of the operation in order to distinguish this likeness from any species of visual resemblance or iconicism [1: 7].

The passage appears to grant the subject of religion a whole world to subdue and conquer, and along with it the promise of a sexual relation, in which the injunction to "be fertile and increase" reweds man to the nature that he masters through the joy of reproduction. Such a relation between human mastery, nature, and sex is exemplified in the medieval ideal of feudalism, in which the lord works together with his serfs to maintain a pastoral economy sealed by the kiss of courtly love. In this reading, Adam is the first master, the patriarch of the human universe, the primal father of his own Edenic horde. Yet in the biblical lines, sexual difference is precisely what distinguishes human beings from nature rather than reunites them with it. Although the injunction to increase and multiply associates human reproduction with the world of the animals, who were given the same mandate [Gen. 1: 22], only humanity is specifically created as "male and female."[7] Whereas reproduction casts man as animal, sexual difference forever alienates humanity from nature. Even the apparent symmetry between human and animal fecundity is thrown off balance by the different framings of the same injunction: whereas God simply "blesses" the animals with this dictum, he directly addresses Adam and Eve: "God blessed them *and God said to them,* 'Be fertile and increase.'" This apparently minor variation, long noted in the exegetical tradition, emphasizes the fact of linguistic utterance, a scene of enunciation that forever reorients and displaces the sexual act it mandates. What is in effect *descriptive* in the animal context (though it is an inaugural or creative description) becomes *legislative* in the human context; in traditional Jewish enumerations of the 613 commandments in the Torah, the injunction to increase and multiply counts as the first, a tabulation that ensures that the duty to reproduce is not a law of nature, since it comes as a demand from the Other separating human being from biological *jouissance*.

In the Second Commandment, God prohibits the worship of "other gods before me"—literally, "before My face": as Lacan points out, the commandment at once gestures beyond the prohibition of idolatry toward radical iconoclasm (as indeed it would be interpreted) and falls short of a total evacuation of the image, holding the lure of the imaginary in abeyance rather than killing it off entirely. The "face" of God forms a negative inter-face between word and image; the phrase momentarily anthropomorphizes God in the act of interdicting all such phantasms, calling up what it

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7. *The* JPS Commentary *notes: "No such sexual differentiation is noted in regard to animals. Human sexuality is of a wholly different order from that of the beast" [Gen. 13]. Zornberg, on the other hand, associates sexuality in Genesis with man's animal or "horizontal" nature, as one of the "creeping things" of the earth [13–17].*

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rules out.[8] But rather than opening a loophole for image worship, the reference to God's face once more recalls the scene of creation:

> *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.* [Gen. 1: 1–2; *Oxford Annotated Bible*]

The account of the "Spirit of God [*ruach Elohim*]" hovering over the "face [*pnei*]" of the waters recollects pagan scenes of primal lovemaking between heaven and earth, yet it simultaneously shatters such memories by sublimely failing to fill out the specular tableau it promises. The spirit or breath of God is invisible, finding no erotic partner in the mirroring water beneath. The glances of the "face of the deep" and the "face of the waters," caught forever in a linguistic parallelism, can never meet face to face and thus themselves lose face, failing to reflect themselves, each other, or God as image. In both Genesis and Exodus, the cause of this creative collapse of the imaginary is, once more, the name of God. In God's verbal acts of creation, the imperative "Let there be," yehi, contains the letters of God's name, an orthographic pun that brings forward the materiality of the signifier, its status as S_1. Between creation and revelation, the "face" of God emerges not as the admonitory countenance of a human parent overseeing the games of his children, but a sublime visage linked to the void or deep out of which he creates the world.[9] The prohibition against idolatry, the logical consequence of the name spoken in the First Commandment, constitutes the subject of religion as he who desires images forever forbidden him by the language that creates him as a subject.

If, then, the Book of Genesis articulates the sexual relation in a scene of "mastery," man is not the master in this discourse, but rather mastered by it—by discourse as such, its visible plurality constellated by the ineffable name of God. Lacan defines the Master's Discourse as that mode of linguistic and social productivity in which a dumb signifier—ignorant, inarticulate, brute—structurally rather than substantially isolated in its opacity, is set against and motivates, puts to work, the order of all other signifiers. This relation between master and slave is depicted in the top half of the Master's Discourse:

$$\begin{array}{cc} S_1 \rightarrow & S_2 \\ \hline \$ & \hline a \end{array}$$

In *Seminar XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse,* Lacan explicitly identifies the primary signifier with the name of the Hebrew God:

> *Here is someone who satisfies that position, and whom I am going to name without hesitation, because he seems to me to be essential to the interest that we analysts should bring to Hebraic history. It is, perhaps, inconceivable that psychoanalysis could have been born anywhere else than in this tradition. Freud was born into it, and he insists on this fact, as I have stressed, that for making advances in the field he has discovered he only truly has confidence in these Jews who have known how to read*

8. *On the persistence of the image in Judaism, see Elliot Wolfson.*

9. *Calum Carmichael has argued that the first account of Creation given in Genesis was written specifically as a refutation of idolatry as prohibited in the Decalogue of Exodus [46].*

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> *for quite a long time and who live—this is the Talmud—on the reference to a text. He whom I am going to name, who, or which, actualises this radical position of ferocious ignorance, has a name—it's Yahweh himself.*
>
> *In interpellating this chosen people, it is characteristic of Yahweh, when he announces himself, that he is ferociously ignorant of everything that exists of certain religious practices that were rife at the time, and that are founded on a certain type of knowledge—sexual knowledge. [. . .] What right do we have to say that this has no basis? That the manner of moving the Ba'al who, in return, fertilised the earth, didn't correspond to something that may well have worked? Why not? Simply because there was Yahweh and because a certain discourse was inaugurated that this year I am trying to isolate as the other side of analytic discourse, namely the master's discourse, for precisely this reason we no longer know anything about it.* [*S XVII* 158; trans. by Russell Grigg]

Lacan identifies the name of God with the ignorant position of the master signifier—ignorant above all of sexuality, specified here as the fertility cults of ancient paganism, with which Judaism makes an historic break. "Because there has been a Yahweh," Lacan argues, we no longer "know anything" about sex: the discourse of the master inaugurated by the Hebrew Bible primally represses sexual knowledge in the act of prohibiting idolatry. This ignorance is "ferocious," linking it to the "jealous God" of the Second Commandment: "For I the Lord [YHVH] your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generations of those who hate me" [*Oxford Annotated Bible,* Ex. 20: 5]. The master inaugurated by Judaism repudiates pagan pan-sexualism, knows nothing about sex, yet continues to embody a disturbingly violent element of jouissance, precisely through the ferocity of that ignorance. That is, the ignorance at stake is not a passive or neutral lack of knowledge, but a passionate and active not-wanting-to-know, characterized by the violent emotion that the King James translators will call "jealousy."[10]

The rabbis, acknowledging this libidinization of God's prohibition of idols, aligned the Second Commandment (against idolatry) with the Seventh Commandment (against adultery), commandments which face each other across the two tablets of the Decalogue:

1. YHVH		6.
2. No idolatry	⇔	**7. No adultery**
3.		8.
4.		9.
5.		10.

In this tabulation, idolatry is a spiritual adultery, in which Israel, married to God through the contract of the Decalogue, consorts with the gods of other nations, joining them in their festivals of fertility.[11] In the Second Commandment, the "jealousy" of YHVH—the S_1 of the Master—serves to discipline the swarming of signifiers (S_2), whose infinite variety threatens to fall back into the realm of the imaginary which they had abrogated.

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10. The JPS Commentary *notes that the stem "k-n-'" originally denoted "to become intensely red," and became associated with the emotions of ardor, zeal, rage, and jealousy [*JPS, *Ex. 20: 5].*

11. For a précis of the rabbinic tradition, see Feuer 33. For a literary analysis of the idolatry/adultery correspondence, see Lupton, Afterlives *176–96.*

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As such, this Jewish discourse of the master constitutes "l'envers du discours psychanalytique"—the underside, the reverse, but also the enabling ground, of psychoanalysis, which will strive to recover knowledge as sexual, but will find at the core of that knowledge the lack of a sexual relation. This is the insight of Genesis 1:28 and its exegetical coordination with the Second Commandment: the very accession to language that casts humanity in God's likeness simultaneously relegates the twin rewards of control over nature and sexual satisfaction to the order of an imaginary compensation that will frustrate more than satisfy this brave new subject. This subject can accede to a position "in the image of God" only by accepting his difference from Him; idolatry threatens that difference by plugging the symbolic gap between humanity and divinity with a cloud of mediating likenesses, enveloping both in the comforting totality of nature and the lure of sexual fulfillment. As man-made images that invest the things of nature with divinity, idols threaten to cover over the fundamental divisions between humanity and nature on the one hand and humanity and God on the other. It is the horror rather than the splendor of the subject of religion that he is created in God's image, for this differential similitude shapes what Lacan calls "human feeling as a whole" as a region marked by the barring of the imaginary and the lack of a sexual relation.

The First Commandment in its Lacanian interpretation serves to distinguish the Name of God, as unary signifier, from the Greek idea of Being and the discourse of philosophy. The Second Commandment, which strives to regulate the world of all other signifiers (S_2), separates monotheism from the pagan cultures in which it was born, in an epochal retranscription that Lacan sees as definitive for the Western discourse of mastery. Moreover, the Second Commandment not only isolates Judaism from its cultural contexts, but also, more broadly, separates religion *from culture as such,* insofar as "culture" is coordinate with the signifying chain and its economies of sexual and social circulation. We would argue that it is the mistake of Cultural Studies to read culture without reference to the role of master signifiers; to take signifiers in their semiotic plurality alone is to remain caught in the imaginary effects of meaning produced by their succession. The project of psychoanalysis, which finds its *envers* in the decisive cut introduced by monotheism, turns on the creative-destructive efficacy of master signifiers, which organize individual cultures but are not reducible to them, because they are by definition excluded from their fields of exchange. Psychoanalysis does not take shape as a psychological reflection on religion, understood as a species of culture, in a process of developing self-consciousness, but rather takes its bearings from religion as a field "extimate" to culture, as the discourse of those signifiers constitutively absent from the quotidian operations of substitution and displacement. Psychoanalysis, like monotheism, enters into culture as a radical interruption, a moment of unbearable "revelation" that punctuates the smooth functioning of signification in the structures of ideology by traversing the fantasies that subtend them.

3

On the Seventh Day, You Shall Rest (from Signification): $\frac{S_1}{\$} \rightarrow \frac{\quad}{S_2}$

The Fourth Commandment, which enjoins observance of the Sabbath, begins to shift the weight of the Decalogue from the sanctity of God's name to the realm of human activity structured by that name:

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> *Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord [YHVH] your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. For in six days the Lord [YHVH] made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord [YHVH] blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it*. [Ex. 20: 8–11]

The commandment calls up the cacophony of human activity—sons and daughters, slaves and cattle, settlers and strangers—in order to bring it to a momentary stillness, suspending the apparently endless momentum of the human universe in its natural rhythms and economic exigencies. The Fourth Commandment, we argue, continues the work of distinguishing religion from the domains of culture and philosophy, insofar as it mandates a day of rest set apart from the labor of production and signification. At the same time, however, the commandment begins to move the Decalogue away from a discourse of pure alienation, since the gap introduced by the Sabbath is what allows for the possibility of subjectivization. The subject of religion, that is, only emerges in the decompletion of the symbolic universe, through the positive addition to the cosmos of an instance of negation, of suspended activity. In this moment of ar-rest, the subject comes forward as the bearer of the lack that has engendered him, in relation to an as yet unrealized positivity beyond or left over by lack, as its remainder or "rest."

The commandment keys the Sabbath to the seventh day of divine nonactivity that follows and paradoxically completes the six days of Creation in Genesis: "The heaven and the earth were *finished,* and all their array. On the seventh day God *finished* the work that He had been doing, and he ceased on the seventh day from all the work that He had done" [Gen. 2: 1–2; emphasis added]. If the world was "finished" on the sixth day, what did God still have to create on the seventh day in order to "finish the work that He had been doing"? The rabbis respond by arguing that God created rest on the seventh day, bringing his work to completion through this final act—not only ceasing to act, but actively making rest [cf. Genesis Rabbah X]. God completes the world by subtracting something from it, namely his own activity. The seventh day punctuates the unfolding of time, operating as a grammatical period, a full stop that cuts short the profusion of creation and retroactively instills it with lack and hence with the possibility of symbolic significance. The sublime emptiness of the seventh day marks the close of the process of creation *ex nihilo* that began with God's first utterance, an act, the Kabbalah argues, that required God to diminish himself, to decomplete his own fullness in order to make room for the world [Cohen and Mendes-Flohr 965].

Lacan captures the scandal of the Sabbath in a suggestive "aside" that addresses the function of the Sabbath as itself a "setting-aside," a ritualized intermission in the ordinary flow of social intercourse:

> *I leave aside the question of rest on the sabbath day. But I believe that that extraordinary commandment, according to which, in a land of masters, we observe one day out of seven without work—such that according to humorous proverbs, the common man is left no happy medium between the labor of love and the most stultifying boredom—that suspension, that emptiness, clearly introduces into human life the sign of a gap, a beyond relative to every law of utility. It seems to me, therefore, that it has the most intimate relationship to something that we are on the track of here*. [*S VII* E 81]

Lacan's first point about the commandment is a cultural one: the injunction to cease all work for one day a week ran counter to the needs and habits of peoples dwelling on or

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near the margins of subsistence, a living carved out and defended by the continuous labor of slaves and common people. Rest indeed occurred in Mediterranean antiquity, but it was the luxury of the few—the philosophers and the kings—and their *otium* was sustained only by the *negotium* of the many. The Romans, champions of the work ethic in one of its early permutations, were reputedly horrified by the sloth and waste implied by the Jewish Sabbath.[12] In Lacan's reading, the Fourth Commandment is a direct affront to the "land of masters," an injunction which serves once more to separate monotheism from the cultures in which it appeared—from the hierarchical regimes of constant labor negated by the imperative to rest. Although the Sabbath can be rationalized as a technique of increasing human production by allowing for a rest period—hence the Romans would ultimately adopt the idea of a "weekend" in order to maximize productivity—the commandment itself in no way rationalizes rest as a principle of social utility.[13] Indeed, the extension of the commandment to cover every imaginable element of the work force has historically generated a whole series of practical problems and legal circumnavigations. The only rationale given in the Decalogue in Exodus, namely that humanity and its chattel should rest because God himself rested after the six days of Creation, precludes recourse to arguments of economic efficiency, since God's rest was not, of course, the result of exhaustion.

Moreover, the Fourth Commandment distinguishes Israel from *other cultures* by opposing the observance of the Sabbath to *the work of culture as such,* taken as the labor of signification in its many productive forms. The rabbis, confronted with the considerable task of applying this rule to daily life, defined "work" around the thirty-nine activities required to build the Tabernacle, the ark that held the two tablets of the Decalogue during the desert wanderings. This oddly localized yet inclusive definition of "work" clearly identifies human labor with the cultural work of signification, and not with the tasks of survival alone. To cease building the Tabernacle by observing the Sabbath is not to abandon the work of protecting God's written name, but rather to continue that segregation through the construction of the buffer zone of holy time [Heschel 10]. In separating the Sabbath from culture, the commandment and its interpretations nevertheless generate a new culture, a *culture of separation* designed to protect the Sabbath from all encroachments while establishing a set of practical parameters for its preservation and observance.[14]

If the Fourth Commandment serves to distinguish monotheism from culture, it also separates religion from philosophy. Philosophy in its Greek foundations, as Hannah Arendt points out, depended on freedom from both the manual labor of the commoner and the political work of the citizen.[15] The leisure provided by the Sabbath is fundamentally

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12. For midrashim on Roman reactions to the Jewish Sabbath, see Bialik 250, 380.

*13. Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenistic Jew responding to the challenges of philosophy and of Greco-Roman values, defends the Sabbath on utilitarian grounds [*Of Special Laws *2: 60].*

*14. In Deuteronomy, the commandment is not "Remember and keep holy" but "Observe [*shamor*] and keep holy"; the verb* shamar *means "to keep, to heed, watch over, guard, to observe" [Klein 668]. The commandment to "keep [the Sabbath] holy [*lekadsho*]" recalls the first use of the word "holy" [*kadosh*] in Genesis, where it refers to the seventh day; the root* k-d- sh *probably originally meant "to separate" or "set apart" [Klein 563]. This guarding or protecting through the creation of Sabbath laws is carried out most definitively in the Talmud; see* Tractate Shabbat.

15. Arendt writes: "Not only in Athens but throughout antiquity and up to the modern age, those who labored were not citizens and those who were citizens were first of all those who did not labor. . . . It is against the time-consuming political life of an average full-fledged citizen of the Greek polis that the philosophers, especially Aristotle, established their ideal of . . . leisure time, which in antiquity never meant freedom from ordinary labor, a matter of course anyhow, but time free from political activity and the business of the state" [19–20].

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different in structure and distribution from the leisure of the philosophers: it does not pertain to a specific class or vocation, but extends to "your male or female slave" and "the stranger who is within your settlements," indeed to your cattle. It is not time set aside for contemplation or any other positively specified (non)activity in a kind of temporary pastoral, but rather time in which one must not work—hence Lacan's reference to the proverb in which there is no medium between onerous occupation and abject boredom. The Sabbath is an outrage not only to economic practicality and philosophical otium, but also to the "law of utility" that underwrites philosophical ethics from Aristotle to Bentham. The rest mandated by the Sabbath, Lacan insists, is not functional; it is not a rest in the service of personal cultivation or the welfare of a larger social good, remaining instead an Oriental principle of antieconomy lodged at the heart of the symbolic economy of the West.

Yet, if the commandment requires cessation from the work of signification, the Sabbath itself takes on a powerful significatory role in Judaism and the Western complexes formed around it. The Sabbath introduces a "suspension" and "emptiness" into the sequence of works and days, but it is, in Lacan's careful locution, not simply a gap, but "*the sign* of a gap," *le signe d'un trou,* a temporal, nonmimetic symbol of the nonsignifying function of the S_1. The Fourth Commandment aligns the lacuna in the temporal sequence marked by the seventh day with the place held by God's unspeakable name in the procession of signifiers. Out of the string of days, one day is marked off as a break in time: the Sabbath. Out of the string of signifiers, one is held in abeyance: the name of God. The subject of religion falls out of the petty pace of "to-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow," signifying in the nothing of that suspension the possibility of a subject:

$$\begin{array}{c} S-S-S-S-S-S-(\ )-S-S \\ \vdots \\ \$ \end{array}$$

Lacan's famous dictum, "a signifier represents the subject for another signifier," as mathematized in the Master's Discourse, describes this creation of the subject out of the *nihil* that interrupts the symbolic circuit of alienation:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} S_1 & \longrightarrow & S_2 \\ \hline \$ & & \end{array}$$

The barred subject crystallizes out of the de-completion of the signifying chain that accompanies its reticulation by the ligature of S_1 and S_2.[16] Such a subject is the crown of creation *ex nihilo,* insofar as both the subject and creation are defined by a *nihil,* cut off from their natural cycles by the denaturing of time imposed by the Sabbath. Once again, man is "like God," but only to the extent that *each is lacking something*; each is defined by a crucial sacrifice of *jouissance*.

Through this sacrifice, however, some part of *jouissance* is preserved, in an act of what Lacan calls sublimation. Sabbath rest grants a reprieve from the effects of the Master's Discourse, legislating a space in time in which sublimation, as both the interruption and elevation of time, may occur. For Lacan, sublimation "raises the object . . . to the dignity of the Thing" [*S VII* E 112]. If objects in their plurality mirror the

16. These comments are based on glosses of Lacan provided by Jacques-Alain Miller, "To Interpret the Cause" [33] and Bruce Fink, The Lacanian Subject *[74–77].*

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S_2 of the signifying chain, sublimation describes those moments of artistic creation, intellectual thought, or religious act that serve to bring an object into relation with the occluded *jouissance* at the heart of social exchange. Sublimation effectively takes the object out of circulation, blocking off its endless associative links in order to expose the presymbolic Thing. The primal scene of sublimation for Lacan is creation *ex nihilo,* in which God as potter fashions the world around a hole:

> *Now if you consider the vase from the point of view I first proposed, as an object made to represent the existence of the emptiness at the center of the real that is called the Thing, this emptiness as represented in the representation presents itself as a* nihil, *as nothing. And that is why the potter, just like you to whom I am speaking, creates the vase with his hand around this emptiness, creates it, just like the mythical creator,* ex nihilo, *starting with a hole. [. . .] The fashioning of the signifier and the introduction of a gap or a hole in the real is identical.* [*S VII* E 121]

The throwing of the jug around a void models sublimation insofar as it points at the Thing, understood as the primitive insertion of a minimally articulated hole into the unbearable fullness of the real. The traumatic void named here by the Thing will return in Lacan's later seminars as the impossibility of a sexual relationship, the constitutive failure of the coupling of S_1 and S_2 which determines the circuits of desire.

The subject of the Sabbath, we might say, *does not work.* On the one hand, the subject is defined negatively by its position in and as the stoppage of the symbolic order by Sabbath rest, which demands the cessation of *jouissance,* entailing, as Lacan suggests, "the most stultifying boredom"; as such, it remains within the purview of alienation. On the other hand, the Sabbath shelters a *supplementary jouissance* in the arrest of signification, elevating the subject's lack to the dignity of the Thing, and casting the achievement of rest as itself an act of refilling or repairing the world. In Lacan's analysis, creation *ex nihilo* is the equivalent on the cosmic level to the Sabbath on the economic level. In Aristotelean philosophy, Lacan argues, the doctrine of the eternity of matter demarcates a closed universe in which nothing is made of nothing, a totality that Lacan identifies with the imaginary set of all signifiers [*S VII* E 121]. The limitations of Aristotle's physics echo the limitations of his economy, which remains an economy of the master. The work of the slaves must go on if philosophical contemplation is to occur; the only moral of the Master's Discourse, Lacan suggests, is "keep on working" [cf. Miller, "To Interpret the Cause" 39]. If the *cosmos* and *oikos* of Aristotle equally abhor a vacuum, the natural and social worlds of Genesis and Exodus reveal the reverse. Just as Genesis posits a world created from nothing, the Sabbath inserts a *nihil,* a nonfunctional, nonmediating interruption, into the relentlessness of economic exchange, offering the subject momentary release from "the land of the masters," a world defined equally by the endlessness of work and the eternity of matter.

The Sabbath, however, does not institute freedom from the master, but rather the responsibility to encounter the master apart from the comforting frameworks of custom, utility, or social hierarchy—that is, to meet the master precisely in the dizzying gap which marks the constitutive breakdown of his discourse. In the rabbinic tradition, this is the encounter called "study," the exegetical *envers* of philosophical speculation.[17]

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17. In his seminar 1, 2, 3, 4, *Jacques-Alain Miller describes psychoanalytic interpretation as a return from the philosophical abstractions of Christian allegoresis to the* literal *readings of the rabbis; he glosses Lacan's matheme for the signifier of the lack in the Other, S(Ⱥ), as "the signifier of barred allegory"—the signifier, we might say, of the* lack *of an anagogic relation [March 27, 1985; 379].*

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Franz Rosenzweig, retrieving that underside in *The Star of Redemption* (1921), his exegetico-theological critique of Hegelian dialectics, schematizes the monotheistic interruption of history in terms of three vectors, Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. The Decalogue is the central text of Revelation, the nation-creating law handed down at Sinai. As we have seen, the Decalogue in turn takes its bearings from Creation, as the primal configuration of a sublime structure prior to any specific sublimations, at once more universal and more distant than the direct address of Revelation. The *yehi* ("Let it be") of Creation anticipates the intimate Name of God that authorizes Revelation, linking the S_1 of God's radical singularity to the S_2 of his Torah. Together, Creation and Revelation posit the subject as the empty space or placeholder for the potential of its own redemption, its always deferred emergence as a full subject, animated by the desire for a messianic era. Rosenzweig identifies Redemption with a final Sabbath in which God himself is redeemed: "Redemption is his day of rest, his great Sabbath . . . Redemption redeems God by releasing him from his revealed name" [383]. The revealed Law of the Sabbath is not only a reminder of Creation but its remainder; as such, it anticipates Redemption, the space-time of sublimation in which the subject may find some relief from the enslavement of the letter. Subjectivization emerges in the space inserted by the Sabbath between Creation and Revelation; sabbatical sublimation holds open the Master's Discourse, preventing it from freezing into the totalitarianism of the closed discourse of the Other. In the words of Walter Benjamin, one of Rosenzweig's strongest readers, "every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" [264]. The weekly punctuation of the Sabbath casts Redemption not as an imaginary conclusion to the historical process, but as an ever-present opening in the signifying chain, the self-difference of every moment produced by the anxious expectation of time's end.

4

Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbor's Thing: $\frac{S_1}{\$} \longrightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$

In an exegetical tradition that includes both Hillel and Jesus—a founder of the Rabbinic tradition on the one hand and that tradition's most controversial reformer on the other—love of God and love of the neighbor have been taken to summarize the dialectic of the two tablets of the Decalogue. For Lévinas, the realm of the neighbor defines the ethical domain left over by the withdrawal of God from and as his unspeakable name:

> *But what is the positive meaning of the withdrawal of this God who says only his names and his orders? This withdrawal does not cancel out revelation. It is not purely and simply a non-knowledge. It is precisely man's obligation towards all other men.* [*Beyond the Verse* 123]

This turn describes the arc of the Decalogue, as it shifts from the first five commandments, dedicated to the preservation, elevation, and sequestering of God's name, to the second tablet, which addresses the realm of human interaction without reference to God's name at all [Kugel 381]. It is as if the first tablet had proffered the Tetragrammaton in order to defer it, putting it away in order to clear the space of proximity, the possibility of nearness, inhabited by the neighbor in the second tablet. In these final commandments, the clamor of village life returns, teeming with fantasies

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of theft, murder, adultery, deceit, and improper desire that evoke a whole world of narrative possibility and dramatic conflict. Each of these commandments can be put into the service of social utility by asserting the inviolability of property—the propriety of the person (murder), of the sexual relationship (adultery), and of objects (theft). The regimentation of social space instituted by these first three neighbor-commandments is purified and transformed into the grounds of a private subjectivity by the protection of juridical speech (false witness) and the codification of desire itself (covetousness). Yet Lacan's project—and Lévinas's as well—is to set the second tablet of the Decalogue precisely against the world of social utility (Lacan), against the notion of justice as the benchmark of equality and reciprocity (Lévinas), and to see it instead as an attempt to regulate, but also to approach, the uncomfortable proximity of the Thing personified by the neighbor.

The neighbor, a figure irrevocably associated with Scripture in the Western tradition, dwells in the region between philosophy and culture. The neighbor is neither my friend nor my brother, not a citizen, nor indeed a subject; the neighbor instantiates the barest minimum of a social relationship, in excess of family yet falling short of the polis. The neighbor is the object of the highest ethical imperative, to be loved "as myself," precisely because he is the bearer of both intolerable difference and uncanny similarity. Lacan links the death of God—the withdrawal marked by his name—to the love of neighbor, retracing the bifurcation of the Decalogue into two tablets and putting God's death in the place of his love, as its condition [*S VII* E 193]. In the *Project for a Scientific Psychology,* Freud identifies the originary experience of trauma with what he calls the complex of the *Nebenmensch*—literally, the next-person—at the core of which lies *das Ding,* something strange and unrepresentable around which the infant begins to construct its reality.[18] Lacan takes this encounter with the *Nebenmensch* as the primal scene of ethics, understood as a search for the good beyond social utility—beyond, that is, the limited economies of both culture and philosophy:

> *Ethics is not simply concerned with the fact that there are obligations, that there is a bond that binds, orders, and makes the social law. . . . [E]thics begins beyond that point.*
>
> *It begins at the moment when the subject poses the question of that good he had unconsciously sought in the social structures. And it is at that moment, too, that he is led to discover the deep relationship as a result of which that which presents itself as a law is closely tied to the very structure of desire. If he doesn't discover right away the final desire that Freudian inquiry has discovered as the desire of incest, he discovers that which articulates his conduct so that the object of his desire is always maintained at a certain distance. But this distance is not complete; it is a distance that is called proximity, which is not identical to the subject, which is literally close to it [*proche*], in the way that one can say that the* Nebenmensch *that Freud speaks of as the foundation of the thing is his neighbor [*prochain*].* [*S VII* E 75–76; F 92]

Lacan distinguishes ethics from the "bond that binds, orders, and makes the social law," since it exists beyond the organizing ideals of the common good instituted in the dialectic of the pleasure and reality principles. Such notions, Lacan argues, merely

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18. Lacan's discussion of the neighbor in Seminar VII *derives from his readings of Freud's early quasi-neurological treatise,* Project for a Scientific Psychology *(1895) and his mature Nietzschean reflections in* Civilization and Its Discontents *(1929). For further discussion of the neighbor in psychoanalysis, see Kenneth Reinhard, "Freud, My Neighbor."*

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serve as beautiful masks concealing something simultaneously more abysmal and more authentically ethical—the *jouissance* negated by sociality in the name of a regulated desire. This *jouissance* defines the ethics of psychoanalysis insofar as it marks the space of proximity in which the subject's desire is most originally bound up with that of the Other, the nighness of the neighbor that is prior to and persists within the polarizations of friend and enemy, brother and stranger.

Lacan's most extensive comments on the Decalogue are devoted to the Ninth Commandment: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" [Ex. 20: 13], or as Lacan reads it, "Thou shalt not lie." There is, as Freud tells us, a "first lie" that structures the unconscious, a lie, according to Lacan, in the face of the Thing, an act of primal repression that installs language, the law, and desire as a structure of defense against its overwhelming *jouissance*:

> *I want to take up the prohibition on lying insofar as it is related to what presented itself to us as that essential relationship of man to the Thing, insofar as it is commanded by the pleasure principle, namely the lie that we have to deal with every day in our unconscious.*
>
> *"Thou shalt not lie" is the commandment in which the intimate link between desire, in its structuring function, with the law is felt most tangibly. In truth, this commandment exists to make us feel the true function of the law. And I can do no better than to place it besides the sophism in which is manifested most strikingly the type of ingenuity that is furthest from the Jewish or talmudic tradition, namely, the paradox of Epimenides, he who affirmed that all men are liars. What am I saying, in proposing the articulation of the unconscious that I gave you; what am I saying, responds the sophism?—except that I, too, lie, and consequently, I can affirm nothing valid concerning not simply the function of truth, but even the significance of lying.*
>
> *"Thou shalt not lie" as a negative precept has as its function to withdraw the subject of the enunciation from that which is enunciated. Remember the graph. It is there that I can say "Thou shalt not lie"—there where I lie, where I repress, where I, the liar, speak. In "Thou shalt not lie" as law is included the possibility of the lie as the most fundamental desire.* [*S VII* E 81–82]

Lacan uses the Ninth Commandment explicitly to distinguish the impetus of the Decalogue from that of philosophy. Whereas for Epimenides, the statement "I am lying" presented a logical paradox that challenged the discourse of truth, Lacan's point is precisely the opposite. The idea that the unconscious is a "paradox" where the only truth is that there is no truth is, according to Lacan, "furthest from the Jewish or talmudic tradition" that informs psychoanalysis. The truth of the unconscious is structured around the negation of the traumatic *jouissance* of the Thing, a repression "commanded by the pleasure principle" as the enforcer of everyday reality and the ideal of the common good. Yet the lapses of the unconscious nevertheless speak *a truth,* not the absence of truth or a paradox, but the positive truth of this negation, in its various modes (repression, denegation, repudiation, foreclosure, etc.). The commandment "Thou shalt not lie" produces the desire to lie, and desire as such, as a sop thrown to the subject in lieu of the *jouissance* canceled by the law itself. The prohibition of lying is more than an exemplary interdiction here insofar as desire emerges in speech, in the divergence of the utterance from the statement. Although such a logic posits every use of language as a kind of lie, insofar as it denies *das Ding,* it is distinct from the philosophical sophism of the "liar's paradox," which presumes the identity of the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the statement. The liar's paradox is no paradox at all, Lacan insists, when we realize that the subject is radically divided, that

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there are indeed *two* subjects involved, subjects that only coincide in the fullness of the imaginary.

In the Torah, the commandment is even further from Greek logic than Lacan indicates, insofar as it reads, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." This wording places the emphasis not so much on the epistemological question of the transparency of language as on the ethical question of the subject's relation to the neighbor as the locus of its desire. Moreover, the false witness of the Decalogue, unlike the more purely logical instance of the Greek liar, takes place within a socio-juridical scene. In this regard, false witness operates like the joke in Freud's analysis, since both of these linguistic transactions take place among three people with the purpose of producing an illicit *jouissance*. The joke implicates the joker, his audience, and the female butt of the witticism; it uses the signifier to short-circuit meaning in order to generate a surplus pleasure that humiliates the woman. False witness requires the witness, the judge, and the neighbor, in a speech act that violates the neighbor's social standing, perversely instigating the *jouissance* of public shame for the sake of the Law. Gossip, an attenuated form of false witness, demonstrates the fundamental difference between false witness and lying, since the damaging enjoyment produced by gossip inheres not in its truth or falseness, but in the social consequences of the types of pleasures and pains it activates in the three parties. *Loshon hora*—sins of the tongue—are the central transgressions atoned for on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Holy Day of reparation and forgiveness, because they encapsulate in symbolic form the entire litany of social sins of the second tablet. Acts of real violence (murder, adultery, and theft) are symbolic—limit cases that test the moral imagination of the community—while acts of symbolic violence (false witness and covetousness) are real, infusing every moment of social interaction with the beliement and malignment of the Thing given a face by the neighbor.[19] Indeed, we could translate the Ninth Commandment in Lacanian terms as *thou shalt not bear false witness to das Ding*: an impossible injunction, one which we must violate, because it is only by violating it that we come into full compliance with the law of desire as the attenuation of *jouissance*.

Lacan uses the Ninth Commandment to distinguish the weight and vector of the Decalogue from that of the liberal discourse of rights:

> *I am going to give you a proof that is to my mind nevertheless valid. It concerns Proudhon's famous phrase: "Property is theft." Another proof is that of the cries of anguish lawyers emit whenever it is a question, in some more or less grotesque and mythical form, of using a lie detector. Must we conclude from this that the respect of the human person involves the right to lie? Surely, it is a question and not an answer to reply "yes, certainly." One might say, it's not so simple.* [*S VII* E 82]

The discourse of rights is founded on the privacy and self-possession of the person; the specter of a lie detector offends the liberal subject because it would trespass on the inalienability of the inner self, its interiority supremely manifested in the freedom of expression. In its symbolic dimension, as a support of the social order, the Ninth

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19. Adultery presents an interesting case of the mediation between symbolic and real violence (a distinction which itself requires more dialecticization): the Torah institutes an ordeal for the suspected adulteress called the sotah, *which involves her drinking water in which a piece of parchment with God's name on it has been dissolved—the unique situation in rabbinic law in which God's name can be destroyed. The violence of adultery against the social order is deemed severe enough to require the sacrificial violence of God himself. On the* sotah *see the editor's commentary in* JPS, *Numbers 5, and Lévinas,* Beyond the Verse *124.*

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Commandment tries to guarantee the stability and value of language. We rebel against such a commandment because we lie all the time—in the compromise formations of dreams, poetry, and social arrangements, in every act of speech. But what we traduce is not a hidden truth or human essence, but something that itself belies the humanist discourse of rights: the Thing that expropriates subjectivity prior to all property. In Lacan's reading, the Decalogue is the *envers* of the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights defends the proprieties of the person, in order to protect the free exercise of expression and exchange ("the pursuit of happiness"). The Decalogue, however, asserts the fundamental limiting of the subject's freedoms by *responsibility for the neighbor,* a response-ability to the extimate fragment of the real that the subject is called to confront ("the pursuit by *jouissance*").[20] It is in this sense that Lacan agrees with Proudhon that "property is theft": the subject displaces its originary lie against *jouissance* in the fantasy that its *jouissance* has been stolen by the neighbor, who continues to enjoy it excessively. As Slavoj Žižek has argued, this is the primal fantasy underlying social violence and race hatred, a fantasy of the other's enjoyment that is indeed most proper to the self.[21]

If the first word of the Decalogue announces God's name, its last word is "neighbor," *re'a*: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house: you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's [*l'reachah*]" [Ex. 20: 14]. Just as Lacan distinguishes the Ninth Commandment from the syllogisms of philosophy, he rejects the cultural and ideological readings apparently invited by the Tenth Commandment's list of objects:

> *Putting the wife between the house and the donkey has given rise to more than one idea that one can recognize there the exigences of a primitive society—a society of Bedouins, "wogs" and "niggers"* [des bicots, des ratons]*. Well, I don't agree.*
>
> *The law affirmed here, the part concerning one's neighbor's wife at least, is still alive in the hearts of men who violate it every day, and it doubtless has a relationship to that which is the object of our discussion today, namely,* das Ding. [*S VII* E 82–83]

The sandwiching of "wife" between the "house" and the "slave" of the neighbor casts her as chattel, reinforcing sociological readings of the commandment as a defense of material and sexual property in a primitive world ruled by the barest needs of life. Yet Lacan insists that this reification of the wife aligns her not with objects of exchange but with the Thing beyond exchange; rather than falling to the level of a possession through

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20. As Renata Salecl has argued, the theoretical possibilities are not limited to either the guarantee of the subject's freedom by the positive articulation of a set of universal rights or the enslavement of the subject to the tyranny of a Thing figured in the various guises of the perverse superego, but include the infinitization of rights through their nonclosure: "There is no one who does not have rights; i.e. everybody taken individually possesses rights, but precisely because of this we cannot say that people as such have rights . . . rights as such cannot be universalized, because universalization always needs an exception. There has to be someone who does not have rights for the universal notion of rights to exist" [Spoils *133]. In this regard, it would be interesting to examine the nonuniversal foundations of the Decalogue, as a document constituting a nation apart, in order to develop further the notion of the Decalogue as the envers of the Bill of Rights. For further Lacanian commentary on the discourse of rights, see Joan Copjec. See also Lévinas, "The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other," which argues that the rights of the individual derive from the responsibility to the other.*

21. See Žižek, Tarrying with the Negative, *chapter 6, "Enjoy Your Nation as Yourself!" 201–05.*

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her placement in the sequence, the presence of the neighbor's wife—the proximate yet forbidden libidinal object—in fact raises the string of goods to the dignity of the Thing. These are the precious things of sublimation, frangible but not fungible, removed from general circulation and reserved for the exclusive enjoyment of their collector.

Lacan goes on to summarize his discussion of the *Nebenmensch* in Freud as it bears on the Tenth Commandment:

> *It is not after all a question of just any good here. It is not a question of that which creates the law of exchange and covers with a kind of amusing legality, a kind of social* Sicherung, *the movements, the* impetus, *of human instincts. It is a question of something whose value resides in the fact that none of these objects exists without having the closest possible relationship to that in which the human being can rest as if it were* das Trude, das Ding—*not insofar as it is his good, but insofar as it is the good in which he may find rest. Let me add* das Ding *insofar as it is the very correlative of the law of speech in its most primitive point of origin, and in the sense that this* Ding *was there from the beginning, that it was the first thing that separated itself from everything the subject began to name and articulate, that the covetousness that is in question is not addressed to anything that I might desire but to a thing that is my neighbor's Thing.*
>
> *It is to the extent that the commandment in question preserves the distance from the Thing as founded by speech itself that it assumes its value.* [*S VII* E 83]

One might think that the Tenth Commandment serves to discipline desire, reinforcing the propriety of property by staking its claims in the very interior of the self. Yet Lacan distinguishes the field of this commandment from that of "anything that I might desire." Although the Tenth Commandment seems to lead into the particular objects and prohibitions that define the social world, its real thrust, Lacan argues, is directed at the traumatic Thing from whose cancellation the social world arises. The commandment "preserves the distance from the Thing" rather than governing the transactions of desire that circulate around it—preserves, not dissolves, since it sustains a traumatic nearness, the proximity of the originary *Nebenmensch* of the subject's earliest contacts. This spacing, moreover, is ethical insofar as it can itself be separated out from the symbolic complex of naming as a new creative void, to be redeployed, reinitiated, reconstructed—sublimated—in the subject's relationships to all who neighbor on its desire.

Behind the ostention of coveted goods, the Tenth Commandment shelters the element not fully thematized in the Decalogue so far: namely, the presence of *the object,* the product or residue of the Master's Discourse:

$$\frac{S_1 \longrightarrow S_2}{\$ \qquad a}$$

The mobilization of the symbolic order has at its underlying truth the subject that it represents through barring; the primordial *jouissance* avoided in the articulation of signifiers, however, leaves a by-product, "the remainder (*reste*) I call object a" [*S XX* 6]. The decompletion of the Other that was necessary for the constitution of the subject is just as threatening as was the overwhelming fullness of the unbarred Other, since the subject finds itself alienated in an Other that is inconsistent, unpredictable, giving it no grounding, no "rest." As Jacques-Alain Miller points out, the lack of a

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well-defined *modus operandi* for the sexual relation is the real trauma that results from the decompletion of the Other that cleared the space for the subject ["To Interpret the Cause" 36]. Hence the subject wrests from the Other some bit of the jouissance lost in alienation, and masks or fills out the Other's inconsistency with the object of fantasy, which affords the subject its only *jouissance,* its only claim to being. The formula for fantasy ($ <> *a*), accretes as the bottom half of the graph, positioning the subject barred by alienation across from the object that will afford it a degree of separation, a thing of darkness it will call its own.

If the signifier (S_1) represents the subject ($) to another signifier ($S_2$), the remainder of this process is the *objet a,* the piece of supplementary *jouissance* through which the subject can re-create the world—neither in its own image nor in that of the big Other, but around a *nihil,* a fragment of traumatic alterity, that remains heterogeneous to the symbolic order organized to avoid it. Lacan calls this process "separation," referring both to the primordial constitution of *das Ding* as "the first thing that separated itself from everything the subject began to name and articulate" and to the subject's later encounters with the *objet a* left over by symbolic processes. Through these encounters with an object separate from but proximate to both the Other and the subject, the subject may find relief from the effects of the Master's Discourse, since, as Bruce Fink writes, fantasy "takes the subject beyond his or her nothingness, his or her mere existence as a marker at the level of alienation, and supplies a sense of being" [60]. By creating a renewed space for itself vis-à-vis *jouissance,* the subject may establish new possibilities for a social ethics of the real. Such an ethics would not be based on the repudiation or defamation of the neighbor's *jouissance* that stems from the fantasy of theft in an economy of pure use value ("false witness"). Nor would it involve the drainage or evisceration of *jouissance* via full symbolization, a scenario in which the neighbor is replaced by the consumer in an economy of pure exchange value ("covetousness"). Instead, this ethics of separation would, in Lacan's phrase, "preserve the distance" from the neighbor, sublimating the neighbor's *jouissance* into the place of the Thing, calling for its elevation and dignification, the restoration of its position of alterity, but not its replacement or repression.[22]

If the Sabbath sets off a sublime time for such re-creation *ex nihilo,* the commandments concerning the neighbor give a body to that gap, defined in terms of spatial proximity, as a new positivity upon which an ethics of the real must come to bear. Recall Lévinas on the decalogical shift from God to man:

> *But what is the positive meaning of the withdrawal of this God who says only his names and his orders? This withdrawal does not cancel out revelation. It is not purely and simply a non-knowledge. It is precisely man's obligation towards all other men.* [*Beyond the Verse* 123]

God's withdrawal from his name is not simply a "non-knowledge," the emptying of the word and the world by the *Deus absconditus,* since it clears the very space of social obligation which in its infinity precedes, defines, and overwhelms the subject. Lacan had identified the Tetragrammaton with ignorance—with a ferocious nonknowledge concerning sexuality. Yet, as in Lévinas, this nonknowledge does not exhaust the logic of monotheism, since the object of social obligation—the *jouissance* of the neighbor—precipitates from that ignorance as the site for the supplementation of unconscious

22. *On separation as the countermovement to alienation, both in its originary and ethical dimensions, see Lacan,* Seminar XI *203–29 and Bruce Fink,* The Lacanian Subject *49–68. On the relationship between Lacan's and Lévinas's notions of "substitution," see Kenneth Reinhard, "Kant with Sade, Lacan with Levinas." On alienation and separation in relation to circumcision, see Lupton, "Ethnos and Circumcision" 196–98.*

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knowledge through the infinitization of love. For it is love, Lacan argues, that makes up for the lack of a sexual relation, but in two opposing ways: either as the imaginary masking of that lack, or as what can emerge *in its place*—not as its forgetting but as what persistently holds open the gap, like the finger of Doubting Thomas probing Christ's wound.[23] In defining the place of love in the ethics of psychoanalysis, Lacan repeatedly insists that "jouissance of the Other is not the sign of love" [*S XX* 4, 17, 38]. To make the Other *jouir* (as in false witness) is to fulfill the Other—to attempt to fill the Other's lack in order to belie the impossibility of intersubjectivity. "The sign of love," however, would elevate the object *into the place of* the Other's *jouissance,* in a sublime metaphor, love-as-metaphor, a substitution that does not equate the two or mistake the one for the other.[24]

The ethics of the neighbor that comes forward between the Decalogue and psychoanalysis rests neither in the quietism of a philosophy of "practical reason" that finds its postmodern extension in the deconstructive ethics of indeterminability, nor in the activism of a culturalist cult of custom and ethnicity, of local morality, or, in its contemporary fashioning, a "strategic essentialism." The ethics of the neighbor finds its orientation in the clearing between theoretical transcendentalism and cultural situationalism, as an ethics of the movement or transition between positions and discourses. "Love," as Lacan puts it in *Encore,* "is the sign that one is changing discourses. . . . A change of discourses—things budge, things traverse you, things traverse us, things are traversed" [*S XX* 16–17]. In the history of Western monotheism, Love has indeed been a sign of discursive transition, a meteor flaring across the constellations of the symbolic universe, a divine sign that the fantasy underlying our social links has become unfixed and reconstrued. A key paradigm for such change has been the injunction to "love thy neighbor as thyself," which has served as the historic banner for the Christian universalization and Kantian secularization of Jewish particularism. Yet the doctrine of neighbor-love as a distillation of the ethical law finds ample precedent in the Torah itself and in its rabbinic commentaries. Lévinas retrieves these traditions when he retranslates the Levitical injunction:

> *The phrase "Love your neighbour as yourself" still presupposes self-love as the prototype of love. Here, the ethical signifies: "Be responsible for the other as you are responsible for yourself."* [*Beyond the Verse* 84]

Lévinas's retranscription of Leviticus 19:18 does not dismiss "love" in favor of "responsibility," but rather glosses love *as* responsibility, restoring love to the discourse of the law from which Christianity had epochally removed it. Lévinas's sublimating substitution elevates responsibility to the place of love in order to undo the Christian-secular assimilation of the neighbor, while retaining the scriptural origins and transcendental thrust of social obligation.

Psychoanalysis travels a similar path through and beyond the typological transformations of the Decalogue as a template of the history of Western ethics. Lacan's reading of the Decalogue articulates the dialectical relationship between the death of God in his name (the First Tablet) and the love of the neighbor in the place of God's *jouissance* (the Second Tablet). Moreover, psychoanalysis theorizes and historicizes this division of the Decalogue as the historico-theological movement from law to love, from the pure heteronomy of the Tetragrammaton to the apparent *auto-nomos* and

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23. On Lacan and love, see Juliet Flower MacCannell, "Love outside the Limits of the Law," and the special issue of New Formations *on the topic of "Lacan and Love" edited by Renata Salecl.*

24. For Lacan's account of love as metaphor see S VIII *49–64.*

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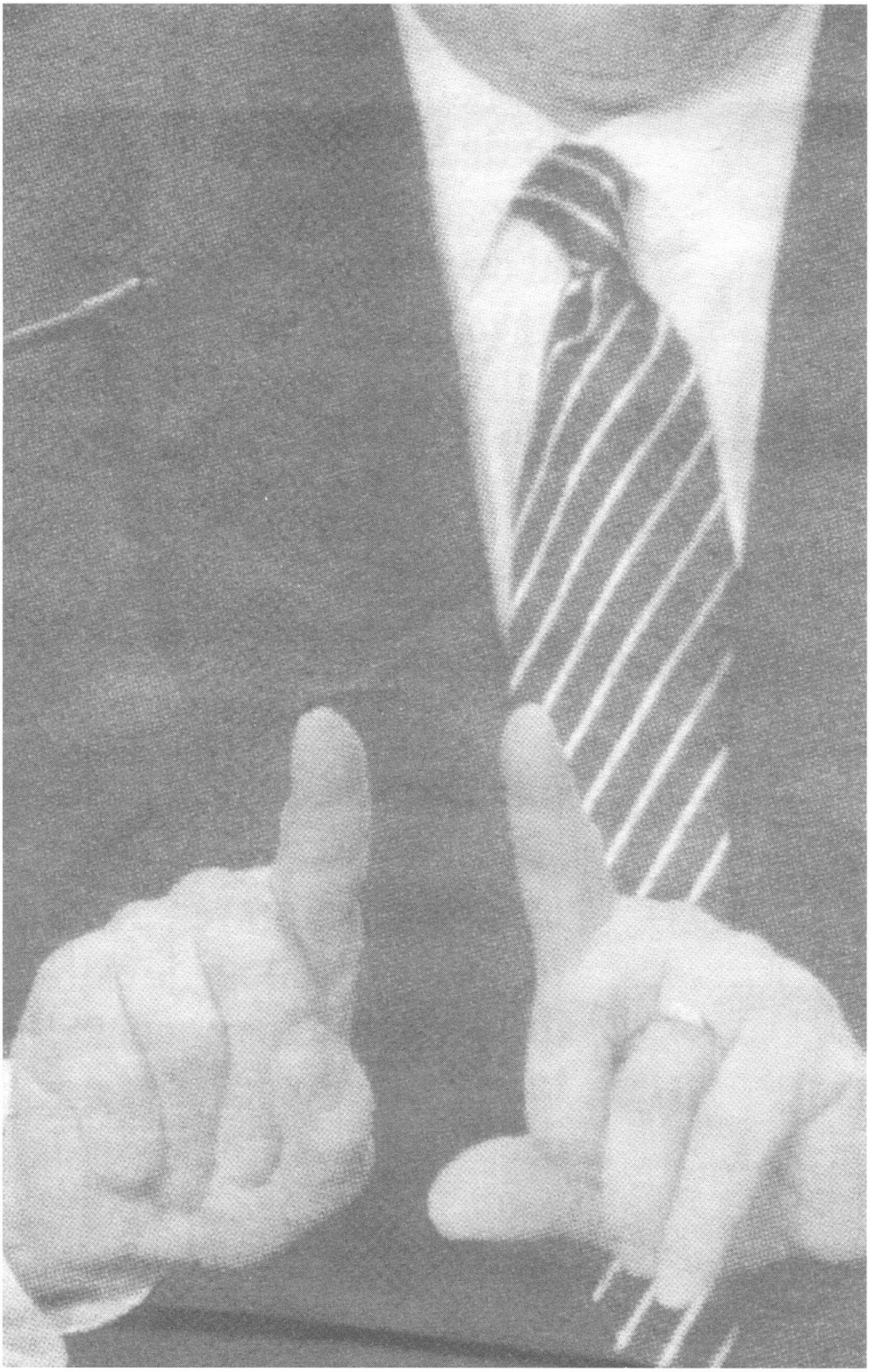

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auto-eros encapsulated in the maxim, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Yet Freud and Lacan also initiate the critical retracing of that movement back into the scriptural unconscious that Judaism constitutes for the Christian-secular West. As such, the Lacanian account of the subject of religion delimits the space between-two-tablets as the arena of a critical practice that would take up the symbolic and sexual vicissitudes of Scriptural letters, religious motifs, and ethicized objects in their passage through the epochs and discourses of secularization and its discontents. It is in this sense that we can conclude that it is not the temptation but rather the opportunity and even responsibility of psychoanalysis to come to be in the place vacated by monotheism in modernity—not in order to fill that place but, lovingly, to probe it.

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